Notes on Trauma and Community

Author(s): KAI ERIKSON

Source: *American Imago*, WINTER 1991, Vol. 48, No. 4, PSYCHOANALYSIS, CULTURE AND TRAUMA: II (WINTER 1991), pp. 455-472

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26303923

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

*The Johns Hopkins University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Imago*

This content downloaded from 217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

KAI ERIKSON

# Notes on Trauma and Community

In the past several years, research errands of one kind or another have taken me to the scene of a number of different human catastrophes—a mountain hollow in West Virginia called Buffalo Creek visited by a devastating flood, a town in South Florida called Immokalee where 200 migrant farm workers from Haiti were defrauded of their meager savings, the ring of neighborhoods surrounding Three Mile Island, an Ojibway Indian reserve in Northwest Ontario called Grassy Narrows that experienced not only the contamination of its local waterways but a disastrous relocation, and a housing development in Colorado called East Swallow plagued by an underground gasoline leak. It has seemed to me throughout that some form of the term "trauma" is the most accurate way to describe not only the condition of the people one encounters in those scenes but the texture of the scenes themselves. The term itself, however, is used in so many different ways and has found a place in so many different vocabularies that it is hard to know how to make of it a useful sociological concept. So I begin with matters of definition.

In classical medical usage, "trauma" refers to a blow to the tissues of the body—or, more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind—that results in an injury or some other disturbance. It is not an infection welling up from within, then. It is not a growth or a rupture or a blockage that originates inside. It is an assault from outside that breaks into the space one occupies as a person and damages the interior.

Trauma, in this usage, refers not to the injury but to the blow that inflicted it, not to the state of mind but to the event that provoked it. To speak of "post-traumatic stress disorder," as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association now does, is to accommodate—very

*American Imago*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 455–472. © 1991 by The Johns Hopkins University Press



This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

awkwardly, I have always thought—to that medical convention. The disorder, that is, is named for the stimulus that brought it into being, a logic very like the one that would be at work if mumps were known as "post-exposure glandular disorder."

In both clinical and everyday conversations, however, that distinction is becoming more and more blurred. Most dictionaries now define trauma not only as "a stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behavior" but as "the state or condition . . . produced by such a stress or blow." In a sense, then, the term has been drifting somewhat ambiguously along the axis that reaches from the precipitating event at one end to the injury or disorder at the other.

Seasoned clinicians have long been aware of this ambiguity. Leo Rangell, for instance, proposed some time ago (1967) that the "traumatic occurrence" be seen as having three separate elements: the "traumatic event," the "traumatic process," and, finally, the "traumatic state" (55). That sounds like sensible advice, so in what follows I will use expressions like "traumatic experience" and "traumatic condition" when the flow of the sentence makes it convenient to do so. But when the term "trauma" sits by itself on the page, alone and unqualified, it will be understood to mean the resulting state rather than the initiating event. This is becoming more and more common throughout the behavioral sciences anyway (and besides, as a wise friend pointed out while we were discussing these matters, this is *my* essay and I can make the words mean what I want).

But there is a less arbitrary reason for resolving the issue in this way, too. The historian who wants to know where a story starts, like the therapist who needs to identify a cause in order to deal with the injury it does, will naturally be interested in beginnings. Those are no more than details to everyone else, however, and not even very important ones at that, because it is the later condition that gives the event its traumatic quality. The most violent wrenchings in the world have no clinical standing unless they damage the workings of a mind or body, so it is the *harm* that defines and gives shape to the initial event, the *harm* that gives it its name. The center of gravity of the traumatic occurrence, that is to say,

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

is the damage done, so it makes particular sense to locate the root word there.

Moreover, trauma can result from a constellation of life's experiences as well as from a discrete event—from a prolonged exposure to danger as well as from a sudden flash of terror, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single assault, from a period of attentuation and wearing away as well as from a moment of shock. Now I am aware that in the process of dragging somewhat negligently across this already well charted ground I am scuffing up a widely observed line separating "trauma" from "stress." Trauma, in this distinction, refers to a violent event that injures in one sharp stab, while stress refers to a series of events or even to a chronic condition that erodes the spirit more gradually. Many others have had trouble with the placement and the logic of that line. Ernst Kris once proposed (1956) that "shock trauma" ("when reality powerfully and often suddenly impinges") be distinguished from "strain trauma" ("the effect of long-lasting situations")—thus claiming for "trauma" a domain on both sides of the line (61).

The difficulty for me is that "stress" simply feels like too bland a word to describe scenes of constant terror and abuse. A bad day at the office, yes. But Auschwitz? So the best solution—my essay, remember—may be to borrow once again from the ASA Manual and define trauma as something "outside the range of usual human experience." Stress, if such a rule were in effect, would refer to the wear and tear of everyday life rather than to moments (or periods) of emergency—to conditions that strain a person's emotional resources but do not necessarily result in personality change.

The classical symptoms of trauma include periods of nervous, restless activity—scanning the surrounding world for signs of danger, breaking into explosive rages, reacting with a start to everyday sights and sounds—against a numbed, gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness, a loss of various motor skills, and a general closing off of the spirit as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm (Lifton 1967, 1976, 1983). Above all, trauma involves a continual reliving of the original experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations, and in a compul-

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

sive seeking out of similar circumstances. Paul Valéry wrote (Felman 1990): "Our memory repeats to us what we haven't understood" (76). That's almost it. But say instead: "our memory repeats to us what we haven't yet come to terms with, what still haunts us."

Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, occupies you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape. To be traumatized, Cathy Caruth says in her introduction to these special issues, is "to be possessed by an image or event" (3), and that feels exactly right to me. The traumatic experience possesses one, takes one over, and in the process threatens to drain one and leave one empty.

I have been dealing so far with the way the human organism reacts to violence done it, whether the originating experience is a private disaster—an automobile accident, for instance—or something shared among a wider community of individuals. Nothing there to attract the professional interests of a sociologist.

But the point to be made here is that traumatic conditions are not like the other troubles to which flesh is heir. They move to the center of one's being, and in doing so give victims the feeling that they have been set apart and made special. The Buffalo Creek survivor who said "the flood washed over me and made me different" was talking of a feeling shared by millions of others (Erikson 1976, 163). She viewed herself as having an altered relationship to the rest of humankind, to history, and to the ways of nature. She viewed herself as marked, cursed.

For some survivors, this sense of difference can become the basis for a mute, aching loneliness, where the traumatic memory is treated as a solitary burden that needs to be expunged by acts of denial and resistance. We know this from personal journals and from clinical records (although even then the act of writing something down or of seeking counsel can be understood as a way of reaching out to other people). For other survivors, however, this sense of difference can become a kind of calling, a status, where people are drawn

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to others similarly marked. The wariness and numbness and slowness of feeling shared by traumatized people everywhere may mean that relating to others comes hard and at a heavy price, so I am not speaking here of the easy comradeship one often finds among those who live through important experiences together. Still, trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common cultural backgrounds can. There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of recognition, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed. A haunting example is provided by the young married couple, described by Shoshana Felman (1991) in the first of these two special issues, who miraculously survived the Holocaust and stayed together afterward, not because they got along (which they did not) but because "he knew who I was—he was the only person who knew . . . and I knew who he was" (65). It is an odd human chemistry at work here, but one noted many times before: estrangement becomes the basis for community, as if persons without homes or citizenship were invited to gather in a quarter set aside for the disfranchized. I do not have space to pursue the matter now, but the implications of this are worth consideration. For one thing, it suggests that trauma has a communal dimension that ought not be overlooked even in focused clinical discussions of the topic. And for another, it suggests—hardly for the first time—that the treatment of trauma may sometimes be best accomplished in gatherings of the similarly afflicted.

The first time I used the term trauma sociologically was in a report I wrote about the Buffalo Creek disaster of 1972, a terrible flood that swept through a mountain hollow in Appalachia and turned a world into wreckage. I tried to make a distinction in that study between what I then called "individual trauma" and "collective trauma." To quote myself:

> By *individual trauma* I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively. This is what clinicians normally mean when they use the term, and the Buffalo Creek survivors experienced

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> precisely that. They suffered deep shock as a result of their exposure to death and devastation, and, as so often happens in catastrophes of this magnitude, they withdrew into themselves, feeling numbed, afraid, vulnerable, and very alone. (Erikson 1976, 153–54)
>
> By *collective trauma,* on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. . . . "I" continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. "You" continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. . . . (Erikson 1976, 154)

To say that Buffalo Creek as a social organism was traumatized—at least when one reflects on the matter—is to run the risk of sounding obvious. Buffalo Creek is part of a cultural setting in which the sense of community is so palpable that it is easy to think of it as tissue capable of being injured. In places like Buffalo Creek, the community in general can be described as the locus for activities that are normally regarded as the property of individual persons. It is the *community* that cushions pain, the *community* that provides a context for intimacy, the *community* that serves as the repository for binding traditions. And when the community is devastated—or virtually washed away, as was the case on Buffalo Creek—one can speak of a damaged social organism in almost the same way that one would speak of a damaged body. The Buffalo Creek incident offered a telling test case of that notion, by the way, since a number of people who were clearly traumatized by what had happened proved to have been a long

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

way from home when the disaster struck and thus never experienced the raging waters and all of the death and destruction first hand. They were injured by the loss of a sustaining community.

Now communities like Buffalo Creek are rare in this country and becoming more so. None of the other disaster scenes I have visited can be described in the same way, so I do not plan to say much more here about the effect of traumatic happenings on human communities. But trauma can work its way into the fabric of the community in other ways as well, and I would like to turn to that matter now.

To begin with, otherwise unconnected individuals who share a traumatic experience can seek one another out and develop a form of communality on that basis. Veterans haunted by dark memories of Vietnam, for example, or adults who cannot come to terms with childhood abuse often gather into groups for reasons not unlike the Holocaust couple mentioned earlier: they know one another in ways that the most intimate of friends never will.

More common, though, are situations where trauma becomes so widely shared an experience within an already existing collection of people that it supplies the prevailing mood and temper of the group—dominates its imagery, governs the way members relate to one another. The point to be made here is not that calamity acts to strengthen the bonds linking people together—it does not, most of the time—but that the shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a common language, a kinship among those who have come to see themselves as different. Something of the sort, at any rate, can be said for each of the disaster scenes I mentioned at the outset.

I also tried to make a distinction in the original Buffalo Creek report—although I am not sure that I really appreciated its significance until later—between those traumatic events that are thought to have issued from the hand of God, and those that are thought to have been the work of fellow human beings. The people of Buffalo Creek were horrified when the corporation they all perceived as responsible for the flood called it "an act of God," and then explained: "The

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

dam was incapable of holding the water God poured into it." Whatever others may say about so peculiar a theology, the residents of the hollow knew it to be blasphemy; and they knew, too, that it reflected a degree of indifference that bordered on contempt. This added sharply to the traumatic effects of the flood, and indeed it has added sharply to the pain experienced in all of the disaster situations I know first hand, for they share in common the circumstance of having been caused by other people. This may be worth a brief excursion:

The ancients feared pestilence, drought, famine, plague, and all the other scourges that darken the pages of the Revelations. These miseries trouble us yet, to be sure, but it is fair to say that we have learned ways to defend ourselves against many of the worst of them. Some (certain epidemics, say) can now be arrested or even prevented altogether. Others (hurricanes, tidal waves) can be seen far enough in advance for people to move out of their path, thus neutralizing a part of their lethal force.

The irony, though, is that the technological advances which have afforded us this degree of protection from *natural* disasters have created a whole new category of what specialists have come to call *technological* disasters—meaning everything that can go wrong when systems fail, humans err, engines misfire, designs prove faulty, and so on. Earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and volcanic eruptions are "natural"; collisions, explosions, breakdowns, collapses, leaks, and of course, crises like the one at Three Mile Island, are "technological."

Now technological disasters have clearly grown in number as human beings press the outer limits of their competence. We are encouraged to think that we can control both the best in nature and the worst in ourselves, and we continue to think so until the momentum of some adventure carries us beyond the edge of our own intelligence. But, more to the point, they have also grown in size. This is true in the sense that events of local origins can have consequences that reach across huge distances—as was the case, say, at Chernobyl. And it is also true in the sense that news of it is broadcast so quickly and so widely that it becomes a moment in everyone's history, a datum in everyone's store of knowledge—as was the case at Three Mile Island.

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The distinction between natural and technological disasters is sometimes hard to draw exactly. When a mine shaft collapses in Kentucky, it is often a collaboration of restless mountain and careless people. When an epidemic spreads across Central Africa, it owes its virulence both to tough new strains of bacillus and to stubborn old human habits.

However hard it may be to draw in actuality, however, that line is generally quite distinct to victims. Natural disasters are experienced as acts of God or whims of nature. They occur *to* us. They *visit* us, as if from afar. Technological disasters, on the other hand, being of human manufacture, are at least in principle preventable, so there is always a story to be told about them, always a moral to be drawn from them, always a measure of blame to be assigned in respect to them. It is almost impossible to imagine a commission of inquiry, called to discover the causes of some dreadful accident, concluding "well, it just happened." We look for responsible human agents and we find them.

Now there is a sense in which it *did* "just happen." This is not because the fates are full of mischief sometimes but because accidents are bound to happen over time as human systems get more and more elaborate. When geologists describe a flood plain as the kind that is likely to be inundated once in fifty years, they are not using a system of reckoning all that different from nuclear engineers who describe a core melt as the kind of occurrence that is likely to take place once in ever 20,000 reactor years of operation. The flood is an act of God, the core melt a human mistake. But both have been written into a kind of script. Both are "natural" in the sense of being foreseeable, inevitable, expectable. The flood lies beyond our control, we say, because nature is simply like that. But core melts can be described as beyond our control because human systems, too, are simply like that. We know it advance that hands will slip and machinery fail some predictable fraction of the time. This makes of them what Charles Perrow (1984) calls "normal accidents."

Technological catastrophes, however, are never understood by those who suffer from them as the way the world of chance sorts itself out. They provoke outrage rather than resignation. They generate a feeling that the thing ought not have happened, that someone is at fault, that victims deserve

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

not only compassion and compensation but something similar to what lawyers call punitive damages. Most significant, they bring in their wake feelings of injury and of vulnerability from which it is difficult to recover easily.

The scene has become an ever more frequent one in our times: a scattering of people, unaware for the most part of the risks they were running, is damaged by the activities of some kind of corporate group. The corporation is sometimes huge, as was the case at Buffalo Creek and Three Mile Island, and it is sometimes no more than a family business, as was the case with the migrant worker camp in South Florida. But most of the time—so often, in fact, that we can almost think of it as a natural reflex—the company draws into its own interior spaces and posts lawyers around its borders like a ring of pickets. Nothing unexpected in that, surely. Anyone who reads newspapers knows how that reflex works.

Yet it always seems to come as a surprise. Those who manage corporations (or more to the point, perhaps, those who are hired to defend them) generally speak of them as if they were *things,* bloodless and inorganic. But victims of accidents rarely forget, even when company officials manage to, that corporate decisions are made by human beings and that corporate policies reflect the views of human beings. And it can be profoundly painful when the people in charge of a company at the time of a severe mishap deny responsibility, offer no apology, express no regrets, and crouch out of sight behind that wall of lawyers and legalisms. A miner from Buffalo Creek, stripped of everything by the flood, said:

> I've often thought some of this stuff [the law suit] could have been avoided if somebody would have come around and said, "Here's a blanket and here's a dress for your wife," or "Here's a sandwich, could I get you a cup of coffee?" But they never showed up. Nobody showed up to give us a place to stay. . . . The Pittston Company never offered me a pair of pants to put on, no shirt.

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

And a woman from East Swallow, whose losses were of a very different kind and did not need a dress or a cup of coffee, thought:

> In all of these years that the spill has been going on, not once has anyone [from the gas company] said, "Hey, we spilled gasoline under your street and, gee, we're sorry and we'd like to help you clean it up." Nobody has ever said that. It's been a matter of seeing how much they can cover up and how much they can get away with . . . I just don't think that's right.

What these people were asking for is so elementary a feature of social life that its absence becomes inhuman. This is not the way of neighbors, fellow townspeople, country men. It is the way of hostile strangers who treat one as if one belongs to a different order of humanity, even a different species, and that makes it all the more cruel.

To be treated thus bewilders people at first, but when time passes and nothing happens, it can infuriate them (often to the point, it may be worth noting, of creating new energy for exactly the kind of legal action the corporation feared to begin with). It is rarely a healing anger, however, because it leaves people feeling demeaned, diminished, devalued. It is hard for people to resist the sense of worthlessness that often accompanies trauma when other human beings whose power they once respected and whose good will they once counted on treat them with such icy contempt.

The mortar bonding human communities together is made up at least in part of trust and respect and decency—and, in moments of crisis, of charity and concern. It is profoundly disturbing to people when these expectations are not met, no matter how well protected they thought they were by that outer crust of cynicism our century seems to have developed in us all. They have already been made vulnerable by a sharp trick of fate, and now they must face the future without those layers of emotional insulation that only a trusted communal surround can provide. And in the long run, the real problem is that the inhumanity people expe-

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

rience comes to be seen as a natural feature of human life rather than as the bad manners of a particular corporation.

Persons who survive severe disasters, as I noted a moment ago, often come to feel estranged from the rest of humanity and gather into groups with others of like mind. They are not drawn together by feelings of affection (in the usual meaning of the term, anyway) but by a shared set of perspectives and rhythms and moods that derive from the sense of being apart.

Among those shared perspectives, often, is an understanding that the laws by which the natural world has always been governed as well as the decencies by which the human world has always been governed are now suspended—or were never active to begin with. Traumatized people calculate life's chances differently. They look out at the world through a different lens. And in that sense they can be said to have experienced not only a *changed sense of self* and a *changed way of relating to others* but a changed *world view.*

Traumatized people often come to feel that they have lost an important measure of control over the circumstances of their own lives and are thus very vulnerable. That is easy to understand. But they also come to feel that they have lost a natural immunity to misfortune and that something awful is almost *bound* to happen. One of the crucial tasks of culture, let's say, is to help people camouflage the actual risks of the world around them—to help them edit reality in such a way that it seems manageable, to help them edit it in such a way that the dangers pressing in on them from all sides are screened out of their line of vision as they go about their everyday rounds. Daniel Defoe has Robinson Crusoe muse:

> This furnish'd my thoughts with many very profitable reflections, and particularly this one, how infinitely good that providence is, which has provided in its government of mankind such narrow bounds to his sight and knowledge of things; and though he walks in the midst of so many thousand dangers, the sight of which, if discovered to him, would distract his mind and sink his spirits, he is kept serene and calm, by having the events of things hid from his eyes, and knowing nothing of the dangers which surround him.

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

People stripped of the ability to screen out signs of peril, naturally, are unusually vigilant and unusually anxious. (A man from Three Mile Island says: "My mind is like a little computer. It's always ticking. I figure it even ticks when I'm asleep.") They evaluate the data of everyday life differently, read signs differently, see omens that the rest of us are for the most part spared. Those people to whom a statistically unusual event has happened are almost sure to work out new probability theories for the world they now find themselves in—theories based less on the calculations of experts than on the experiences of those who have seen up close how chance really operates. After all, how do you estimate the odds of being damaged by a given hazard when it has already happened to you? To consult a chart and then declare that it is a one-in-a-million shot is too abstract a procedure by far. The times call for something else.

Once persons who have been visited by trauma begin to look around them, evidence that the world is a place of unremitting danger seems to appear everywhere. It is a rare morning paper or evening broadcast that does not tell us of exactly the species of mishap we fear most, and if that is the kind of data your mind is sensitive to—the kind of data your eye, made sharp and canny by events of the recent past, knows how to pick out from the flow of news—the darkest of outlooks can seem abundantly supported.

People whose view of the world has been tempered by exposure to trauma can easily lose faith not only in the good *will* but in the good *sense* of those in charge of a dangerous universe. It is not just that those in charge lie or cover up when it suits their purpose, but that they, too, are out of control. *The New Yorker,* reporting several weeks after the catastrophe at Bhopal when the casualty estimates had reached 2,000 dead and 200,000 injured, put it very well (a telling example, incidentally, of the event that becomes a moment in everyone's history):

> What truly grips us in these accounts is not so much the numbers as the spectacle of suddenly vanished competence, of men utterly routed by technology, of fail-safe systems failing with a logic as inexorable as it was once—indeed, right up until that very moment—

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> unforeseeable. And the spectacle haunts us because it seems to carry allegorical import, like the whispery omen of a hovering future. (1985, 17)

The most important point to be made, however, is that when the dread is lasting and pronounced—as often happens in trauma—the spectacle of failed technology can become the spectacle of a failed environment as well. This is a view of life born of the sense that the universe is not regulated by order and continuity, as clerics and school teachers have been telling us for so many centuries, but by change and a kind of natural malice that lurks everywhere. That is the "broken connection" of which Robert Jay Lifton speaks (1979).

When one begins to doubt the findings of scientists and the calculations of engineers, one can begin to lose confidence in the use of logic and reason as ways to discern what is going on. And that is a truly frightening thought, for it has been understood for a long time that deeply felt upheavals, at their worst, can act to upset the established order of things, and, in doing so, create a cultural mood in which dark but familiar old exuberances flourish—millennial movements, witchcraft, the occult, and a thousand other systems of explanation that seem to make sense of bewildering events and offer a means for coping with them.

Let me close by quoting the comments of two women who have pondered these matters deeply. They are both respected elders in their own communities, though still young when they spoke the lines below, and I look up to them both as uncommonly mature and sensible persons.

The first is from Buffalo Creek:

> No, this world's going to blow all to hell one of these days, and it's not going to be long away. I believe in the Bible, and I believe what it said in the Bible is happening now. There ain't going to be a world very much longer. When you see things happening right before your very eyes, you've got to believe it. That's all there is to it. . . . Mostly I read Revelations and things like that to tell me what's going to come. It didn't seem so much to apply to the world and the way it was before

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> the flood. But this disaster that happened to us, I believe it opened up a lot of people's eyes. . . . I believe there will be wars, and there will be a bomblike thing that will just destroy this place to pieces. Somebody, some fool, is going to blow it all to pieces. Sure as I'm sitting here and you're sitting there, it'll happen. . . . So the flood has more or less opened up my imagination. It's got me thinking more and more about the way of life we're having to live, the way our kids is going to have to live, and things like that. I wasn't thinking about those things before the flood. It just seemed like it woke up a new vision, I guess you'd call it, of what is and what used to be. You know, you're almost halfway afraid to turn on the TV anymore. Afraid something's broke out in the United States, afraid some railroad car has broken open with poisonous gases running out right in your brother's face. . . . Sometimes I'll go to bed and think about it, you know—the end of time, destruction, what's going on in wars. It's like growing up, I guess. Before I wasn't thinking about nothing but making sure the house was kept clean, making sure my husband had things he needed for his dinner bucket, making sure the kids had the right clothes on, making sure they was clean, making sure I went to this place at the right time and that place at the right time.

The second is from East Swallow:

> Will we ever be able to be the same people we were before? No, I won't actually ever be the same person. As soon as we learned about this [the gas spill] we make ourselves a list of things we must be sure and check before we ever buy another house. These were not things that we checked before we bought this house, like if there's a gas station within two miles, like if there was ever a dump on the site, like if there was a railroad track within x number of miles, like if there was any kind of industry with a smoke stack within x number of miles. Those things didn't used to be of importance because we were ignorant. Perhaps they should have

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> been important, but, like most people in the world, they weren't. I just can't imagine most people going out and asking all these questions before they buy a house, before they buy land. And whereas it could be argued that it's not a bad thing to become more knowledgeable, it is, I think, certainly a bad thing to become knowledgeable in the way that we've become knowledgeable. It's like a person who's an agoraphobic. If you're terrified to go out of the house, you don't live a very good life. And whether you feel that you have great reason to be terrified—I mean you can be struck by lightning, you can get run over by a car, you can get hit by a train, you're being logical in being afraid to go out—that doesn't change the fact that your life is not real exciting. And if our fears—no matter how well founded, now—affect our lives so profoundly that we can't find anyplace to live without becoming hermits. Alaska's no good anymore. Where can we go? Antarctica? So it has destroyed our future life as well as our present life. I hope that after this is over we'll be able to accept the knowledge we have gained and live with it, and still have a happy, normalish life. But I don't know that that's going to happen. And that's frightening. I mean it can be a real significant problem if you're so paranoid and focused—not paranoid, just so aware—that you can't ever go back to being unconcerned. That's what I don't know yet, whether we'll be able to be concerned and still function.

Voices like those deserve to be listened to carefully.

In summary, then, the hardest earned and most fragile accomplishment of childhood, basic trust, can be damaged beyond repair by trauma. Human beings are surrounded by layers of trust, radiating out in concentric circles like the ripples in a pond. The experience of trauma, at its worst, can mean not only a loss of confidence in the self, but a loss of confidence in the surrounding tissue of family and community, in the structures of human government, in the larger logics by which humankind lives, in the ways of nature itself,

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and often (if this is really the final step in such a succession) in God. Henry Krystal notes in the first of these special issues (1991):

> Desperate attempts are made by many survivors to restore and maintain their faith in God. However, the problem of aggression, and the actual destruction of basic trust which resulted from the events of the Holocaust makes true faith and trust in the benevolence of an omnipotent God impossible (108).

I suspect that matters may be a good deal more complicated than that, but I can report from my own research experience that doubt in even this most elementary of securities is among the cruelties of trauma.

I know that I am bringing these comments to a close just as I am getting ready to deal with the issues they raise, but let me conclude by repeating what I take to be the most important points I have been making. Trauma is normally understood as a somewhat lonely and isolated business because the persons who experience it so often drift away from the everyday moods and understandings that govern social life. But, paradoxically, the drifting away is accompanied by revised views of the world that, in their turn, become the basis for communality. The questions remaining to be asked, then, certainly include these two: To what extent may one conclude that the communal dimension of trauma is one of its distinctive clinical signatures? And to what extent does it make sense to conclude that the traumatized view of the world conveys a wisdom that ought to be heard in its own terms? Trauma can surely be called pathological in the sense that it induces discomfort and pain, but the imageries that accompany the pain have a sense all their own.

*Yale University*

## References

Caruth, Cathy. 1991. "Introduction." *American Imago,* 48.1: 1–11.
Erikson, Kai. 1976. *Everything In its Path.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Felman, Shoshana. 1990. "In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*." *Yale French Studies,* 79: 39–81.

———. 1991. "Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." *American Imago,* 48.1: 13–74.

Kris, Ernst. 1956. "The Recovery of Childhood Memories in Psychoanalysis." *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child,* 11: 54–88.

Krystal, Henry. 1991. "Integration and Self-Healing in Post Traumatic States." *American Imago,* 48.1: 93–118.

Lifton, Robert Jay. 1967. *Death in Life.* New York: Random House.

———. 1976. *The Life of the Self.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

———. 1983. *The Broken Connection.* New York: Basic Books.

Perrow, Charles. 1984. *Normal Accidents.* New York: Basic Books.

Rangel, Leo. 1967. "The Metapsychology of Psychic Trauma." In Sidney S. Furst, editor, *Psychic Trauma,* 51–84. New York: Basic Books.

"Talk of the Town." 18 February 1985. *The New Yorker.*

This content downloaded from
217.128.197.176 on Tue, 28 Sep 2021 02:32:19 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms